

“Complacency Is Not an Option”

A sermon delivered at The Church of the Epiphany on
Sunday, April 15, 2018 at 4:30 p.m.

Readings: Deuteronomy 4:25-40
Revelation 20

(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Deuteronomy probably is one of the most important books of the Bible. It is the first major work that tells us there is a way to understand the world, God, and religious traditions in new ways for a new time.

Deuteronomy means literally “the second giving of the law,” for new realities and new challenges meant that a new understanding needed to be recorded.

The passage read tonight offers an insight that is hardly new – it can be associated with any time and any community. It speaks about being settled and comfortable to such an extent we are not able or even interested in new challenges and different perspectives.

The passage read began: “When you have had children and children’s children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything...”

So that’s the norm: become complacent, live in a settled state, and then you are prone to idol worship? How quickly our priorities change. Surely that is not the way it must be!

But the assumption of the passage is we get to a place in life where we are settled, staid, and beyond facing new challenges, and so therefore we become complacent.

It was an assumption of a church I was interviewed for almost 25 years ago. The question went something like this: “Our ministers seem to stay for a long time – they get comfortable and do not move until they retire. So how will you keep yourself interested and involved when you become comfortable?”

The history of the church showed their assumption was fairly accurate. I did go there in 1994, and I was the fifth minister since World War I. But my answer to their question was not what they expected – it even surprised myself, as I had not thought it through as a principle of my life before being asked.

I still remember my answer. “I do not know what is in the future for Bill Steadman, but I can assure you that the day I realize I am living a comfortable life and find no challenge in what I do, I will be seeking a change in pastoral relations. Being comfortable is not something I seek to experience – I always like a challenge.” Now I did get the position, and I did leave 6 ½ years later – I would not say that I reached the level of being comfortable, but I was excited about the chance to move north and be involved in ministry at St. Andrew’s United in Sudbury, so that captured my imagination.

The stories of the early Israelites are paralleled by the stories of many people in our transient world. Uncertainty abounds, and comfort is not something that is in the cards.

And in contrast, the passage from Revelation speaks about the very vile and dramatic struggle between good and evil, devil and angels, lakes of life and lakes of fire.

On July 21, 2002, *Time* magazine had on its Canadian edition the following title: “The Bible and the Apocalypse: Why more people are reading and talking about the End of the World.” In short, they seemed to answer their own self-imposed question by suggesting that when world events become more and more dire – less than a year after 9/11.

Increasing suicide bombers in the Middle East, uncertainty on the world stage – people look to stories of the end of the world to somehow make sense of what is happening.

But surely this is only half the story.

After all, Jesus lived in an age that was no less dire and worrisome than that of 2002, or even April 15, 2018. Today we have a nation grieving 16 deaths on a hockey bus taking a simple trip across Saskatchewan; we have hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims trapped in refugee camps outside of Myanmar in Bangladesh; we have the Syrian government alleged to have poisoned their own citizens, and major western nations contemplating, then carrying out, a military response to that action; we have tensions between Russia and the west; Ottawa and BC, and the west against the west over oil and pipelines – still in the news today.

700 accidents happened in the GTA in the last 48 hours, and people are stranded in many places in the world because the Toronto airport is effectively closed this weekend. Among those trapped are two staff of our own United Church General Council who have the luxury of another night and day in Sudbury after a workshop led yesterday at St. Peter’s United.

Jesus in his day faced the growing Roman power, a loss of religious commitment and zeal among his own faith, and confusion as to what God expected.

But what did Jesus do? Point to intertestamental literature that was rife with apocalyptic imagery? Speak about the doom of the end of the world? Spread darkness and shadows over a reality already compromised and bleak?

Not at all – he came to speak about loving your neighbour, encouraging the lost and the needy, providing hope in the midst of a world of despair.

Scenarios about the end of the world are only one way to respond where needs are great and confusion is rife. They only work when we live on the basis of fear.

The reading from Revelation that Bishop Anne shared had a line that I did not hear clearly in preparing this message – certainly not as clearly as I did when she read it. It spoke of a person going into the abyss, and one who locked them in and held the key outside of that imprisonment.

Many of us find the abyss when we live with fear, uncertainty, and hesitation, when we try to live without God and without our neighbour. And the truth is, when we fall into an abyss of our own making we have no choice but to live abysmal lives. By definition, that is what

abysmal means. And when self-imposed, we have nowhere to turn to find one who holds the key to unlock our inner turmoil and fear.

The call of Jesus is one that rejects the abysmal life as inevitable, or an answer to anything. Jesus knew that the world may seem scary and fearful when we refuse to hear the stories of others, ignore the needs of others, and refuse to understand that we have a chance to make a difference in the lives of others.

Jesus calls us to a better way, a nurturing way, a way of hope in the midst of despair. It is true in the Roman empire of the first century; it is true in the struggle for peace in the Middle East; it is true in the horrors of captivity and arrest in Myanmar; and it is true in the midst of one of the worst April storms in the last Century.

Listen to Jesus' call, be hopeful and thankful, and your life will be transformed as a people of God.